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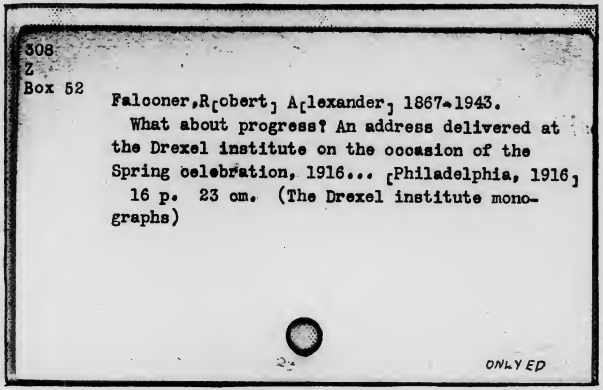

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WHAT ABOUT PROGRESS?

AN ADDRESS
DELIVERED AT THE DREXEL INSTITUTE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SPRING CELEBRATION, 1916

BY

R. A. FALCONER, D.Litt., LL.D., C.M.G.
President of the University of Toronto

PHILADELPHIA
THIRTY-SECOND AND CHESTNUT STREETS
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"Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold."

—*Rupert Brooke.*

WHAT ABOUT PROGRESS?

One of the most dominant convictions of the era in Western civilization which has just closed was that Progress is a justifiable conception. The average man, especially of the New World, was persuaded that this age had made progress beyond all other ages, and that our future was assured. He took for granted that by reason of the inherent powers of Democracy and the immense natural resources of this continent we were bound to reach a position of pre-eminence such as no other period of the world's history had seen. Accordingly institutions and individuals were judged by a supposedly progressive standard. A man and the community in which he lives must be progressive, a business must be progressive, so also the University as the director of organized knowledge. Very few, I imagine, had defined their terms, and when you asked this modern man what he meant by Progress, he would in all likelihood give you a vague and quite insufficient reply in terms of material development and the application of science to industry.

This complacent state of mind prevailed up till August, 1914, but in that month a hurricane smote Western civilization, and ever since, the comfortable home that we had reared for ourselves out of our axioms, opinions, and assumptions has been swaying so violently that broad fissures are appearing in its walls, and we are often fearful lest we shall have to abandon our former domicile. Small wonder, indeed, is it that the dogma is crumbling, for if you seek the manifestations of progress mainly in the accomplishments of science, nowhere will you find such marvelous results as in the superb instruments of modern war—artillery, aeroplanes, superdreadnaughts, submarines; and yet these are being used to destroy with unprecedented slaughter millions of the most civilized men of Europe at the most hopeful and productive age of their life. We may well ask, Does Progress mark the history of man?

Belief in Progress Not Universal

It is quite conceivable that our conviction as to the reality of Progress may spring from temperamental optimism occasioned partly by climate, partly by the extraordinary discoveries of this New World, partly by the energies of youth. There have been great eras of the world's history in which there was no belief in Progress. There are peoples now to whom the idea is strange. China and large portions of India would hardly understand the term. Some philosophies have been constructed on a pessimistic basis; others have assumed that there are cycles in the world's history in the regular return of which man's experience repeats itself.

If we are to get a satisfactory answer to our question as to the reality of Progress we must not fix our glance upon the present age alone nor base our judgment solely upon the depressing conditions of to-day. Fortunately the study of history has made great advance, partly through the practice of scientific method, partly by reason of the unearthing or discovery of records of the past; and a wide survey of the course of human life over great stretches of time, though with large gaps, has become possible. This survey does not reveal uniform and unbroken advance, but it does show on the whole a rise in standards of living and their extension, increasing comprehension by man of the laws of nature and greater control of her powers. To assume, however, from this course of history that Progress attends the years of maturing humanity would be to give the term an external definition, as we have seen is ordinarily done by the average man. We should still ask, Is there any goal in sight? If so, what is its character?

1. History of the Idea

When did men begin to think about Progress? How did they define it? Reflection upon an idea comes late in its history. There must be periods of actual advancement before men set themselves to ask what constitutes development. So it came to pass that continued reflection upon the idea of Progress is quite recent, but it was prepared for by great happenings. If we trace its rudimentary beginnings

and then outline briefly the steps in modern European civilization that created the new world in which the idea sprang into full being, we shall more clearly grasp its import.

Far-off Workings in Greece

As for so much that is most enduring in civilization we must turn to the ancient Greeks for the origins. "Greece first took up the task of equipping man with all that fits him for civil life and promotes his secular well-being: of unfolding and expanding every inborn faculty and energy, bodily and mental: of striving restlessly after the perfection of the whole, and in finding this effort after an unattainable ideal that by which man becomes like unto the gods."*

Though both the idea and the fact of Progress are "far-off workings" from Greece it was not a motive force even in the classic age, for ancient Athens, suffused with melancholy as she looked upon the fleeting shadows of the present, cast her glance backward for the golden age. It was a shortlived era, that classic time, and after the conquests of Alexander a wearied and disappointed society began to lose confidence in its own powers, the sceptic came on the scene, and earnest minds turned to Oriental mysteries or to a hope of revelations from another realm than this.

Contribution of Rome

Greece yielded to imperial Rome, often less human than the captive Greece who conquered her, but far more able to understand and rule humanity. In the Roman Empire law was supreme. The individual had to submit himself to the policy of the state, which was regulated not by the opinions of individual localities, but by imperial decree. In addition to this, philosophical ideas as to the brotherhood of man gained currency in Rome as they never had in Greece, and the Stoicism of the Empire broadened out its ideal until in many cultivated circles a conception of universal brotherhood prevailed. Though this conception was not realized—indeed, was for the most part a pathetic aspiration,—it prepared the way for what came to pass in Christianity. Within the Roman Empire freedom grew less and less, economic and social causes induced decay, and with the

*Butcher, *Aspects of Greek Genius*, P. 41.

irruption of Northern peoples the old Roman Empire lost its vitality, and a new phase of human history appeared.

Not a Regulative Idea in Early Christianity

Long before this, Jesus had sown the seed of a new life in Galilee and His disciples had scattered it over the world. But so far from Progress being one of the regulative ideals of the Gospel, the early Christian would not have understood what we mean by the term. His hope was fixed upon the coming of his Lord and the Kingdom of God, which was imminent and would bring with it the dissolution of the present order and translation into a new state. Men were to prepare themselves for that Day which cometh as a thief in the night. They were to make haste to proclaim its advent, and to spread the Gospel far and wide in the time at their disposal. Signs of change were all about them. Things were being shaken. Only the eternal unseen Kingdom would remain. Therefore in the first two centuries they gave little heed to art, literature, economic conditions, and that aspect of human life which we call civilization. Nevertheless the essential element of Progress is found in the Christian proclamation of the worth of human life, and the apostle Paul comes near the root of the matter when he writes to the Philippians, "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, or if there be any praise, think on these things."

The Birth of the Modern World

We may pass over the intervening centuries that elapsed before our modern world came to its birth. During this period new ideas were maturing, new inventions were devised, new discoveries made. Not the least absorbing chapter of European life is the story of human freedom, intellectual and political. It is a sad story, with many cruelties and much fruitless effort, but also full of heroic and on the whole successful endeavor. Far back in 1395 the Scots poet, John Barbour, glowed with the thought of what freedom brings:

A! Fredome is a noble thing!
Fredome mays man to haif liking;
Fredome all solace to man giffis,
He lives at ese that frely livis!
A noble hart may haif nane ese,
Na ellys mocht that may him plese,
Gif fredome fail'th.

Feudalism decayed, new nations were formed, men of dominant character and genius replaced the old barons in strong cities, the individual got recognition. Democracy like a new land of hope was sighted as a dim cloud on the horizon.

The invention of the printing-press was an event of supreme importance. Henceforth the ideas of the solitary thinker were carried far and wide on the printed page and they became enriched as they passed through many minds.

Age of Discovery

Moved with curiosity and inspired by an awakening courage men peered out of their narrow environment into the unknown beyond. A race of brave pioneers began to assert their right to control the powers of nature and they ventured forth on the ocean, the successors of the "grave Tyrian Trader" who

Snatch'd his rudder, and shook out more sail;
And day and night held on indignantly
O'er the blue Midland waters with the gale,
Betwixt the Syrtes and soft Sicily,
To where the Atlantic raves
Outside the Western straits; and unbent sails
There, where down cloudy cliffs, through sheets of foam,
Shy traffickers, the dark Iberians come;
And on the beach undid his corded bales."

Man's daring spirit awoke in this Age of Discovery. Columbus, the supereminent, burst into the solitude of the Western Ocean and turned thither the trend of exploration. Vasco di Gama rounded the Cape and went to India; Magellan entered the Pacific. There followed a great race of sailors whose familiarity with the ocean in all its moods

dispelled fear. They knew something of what lay beyond; they used the fickle winds, and when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days they went by dead reckoning. Man, greatly venturesome, was asserting his mastery as he has continued to do until the present, and now there is no region of the world into which he has not penetrated; he has discovered the secrets even of the poles. Nor should we judge him in this to be rashly and aimlessly heroic, for he is giving proof of his indomitable resolve to comprehend to the uttermost this sphere on which his lot is cast.

The discoveries of the explorer have always kindled the imagination of the statesman, the man of commerce or the scientist. Especially was this so when the extent of the New World began to appear. A new impulse was imparted to man's sense of power. He dreamed of possible conquests and of an undefiled home for the freedom which had received so niggardly a welcome when it presented itself for recognition in the old world of Europe; his horizon widened, his vision of the future brightened.

So much for the awakening of man's spirit. But he soon undertook also to think out and to express the meaning of this activity. And thinkers in the long run rule the world, for "ideas are the chief agitators."

Idea of Progress Formulated in France

France is the home of the modern conception of progress as a regulative idea of civilization and human history. Like a flash from a lighthouse below the horizon-line these words are found in Pascal in the 17th century: "Those whom we call the ancients were really those who lived in the youth of the world, and the true infancy of man; and as we have added the experience of the ages between us and them to what they knew, it is only in ourselves that is to be found that antiquity which we venerate in others." Then came on the outwardly brilliant age of Louis XIV—a period of incubation for the idea of progress. Society underwent rapid change; religion fell into contempt, supernatural sanctions lost their power, men discovered law in the material universe and substituted reason for faith. Concomitantly with this, tradition was scorned and the foundation slipped from under the old structure of conduct. Starting from the view that nature is a unity and intelligible, Fontenelle and Leibnitz compared the movement of humanity in history with "the great and universal movement which dominates nature"; but they thought of this Progress of the race as coming with painful steps and slow.*

The greatest names in the formulation of this modern idea are those of Turgot and Condorcet. They made popular the thought of the endless progress of the human race on this earth, a limitless intellectual, moral, and physical advancement which can be retarded only by ignorance from reaching its goal of perfection. "All epochs are fastened together by a sequence of causes and effects linking the condition of the world to all the conditions that have gone before it . . . and the human race, observed from its first beginning seems in the eye of the philosopher to be one vast whole which like each individual in it has its infancy and its growth."** This progress of man or his march towards perfection was to be seen in "the gradual evolution and elevation of man's nature as a whole, the enlightenment of his intelligence, the expansion and purification of his feelings, the amelioration of his worldly lot, and in a word, the spread of truth, virtue, liberty, and comfort, more and more among all classes of men." † It was brought about, according to Turgot, by the diffusion of knowledge, in the power of which he had supreme confidence. These ideas were adopted and developed by Condorcet who also held that ignorance was the only barrier to the realization of the perfectibility of the race.

A Defect in a Fascinating Conception

This idea appealed to the imagination of men, and with good reason, for it is a fascinating discovery if we can trace from the dawn of history an ever widening and deepening stream of life, here deviating round an obstacle, there driven back upon itself by some barrier only in the end to surmount it, until finally it is lost in the ocean of human perfection

*See Brunetière, *La Formation de l'idèe de Progrès au XVIII Siècle. Études critiques V.*
**John Morley, *Miscellanies* II, p. 96.
†Flint, *History of Philosophy of History*, p. 282.

from which the brooding clouds of ignorance have been dissipated. Nor need we question the worth of the idea because it was late in coming into vogue. Experience may prove that the longer the mind of man dwells upon it the more intrinsically probable it will become. But it is to be remarked that however valid the conception of the perfectibility of the human race on this earth may be, its essence cannot be interpreted, as Turgot and Condorcet thought, to reside merely in the advance of intelligence. No further proof of this is necessary than the present war among the most intelligent peoples of the world. We hardly needed this reminder, for it has been a commonplace that great intellectual attainment may lower instead of heightening sympathy and may blind its possessor to simple but universal feelings and emotions which unite society and create character.

"Knowledge comes but wisdom lingers."

The Optimism of the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century was one of the greatest in history. It was full of optimism, and well it might be, for insignificant though each individual is, man has asserted his mastery over nature as never before, has learned to dread her less in her most awful moods, has essayed and accomplished tasks which a few generations ago would have seemed to be miraculous. Indeed the Greeks would have feared that this mastery bordered on the impious, and that piercing through mountains and plunging into the depths, man would bring upon himself such ruin as fell upon Xerxes for his insolence in encroaching upon the domain of the gods by bridging the Hellespont. What cannot man attain unto? He has made the earth to shrink, has lessened time, has unearthed the past, has dissipated mysteries and is endeavoring to take from death itself the terror that has always invested it. This optimism reinforcing belief in "verifiable" progress, to use Bagehot's expression,* has been heightened by the promulgation of the biological law of evolution, a

*See *Physics and Politics*.

Influence of Doctrine of Evolution

scientific hypothesis of almost universal acceptance which in its realm seems to run parallel with the idea of progress in the moral and historical domain of human life. Under the impulse of the doctrine of evolution men looked into the future with great expectation. Metchnikoff went so far as to say that "old age is a form of disease or is due to disease and theoretically at least is capable of being eliminated." Though not accepting this view Sir Edward Schaefer forecasts the possibility of the dawn of a day when man will have learned to regard the coming of death as "a simple physiological process as natural as the oncoming of sleep . . . and the sunshine which science irradiates may eventually put to flight the melancholy which hovers, bat-like, over the termination of our lives."*

2. Is the Idea of Progress Valid?

Ours has been an optimistic era, a confident age, a hopeful period on which the idea of Progress shone like a fixed luminary. But may it be that the clouds now gathered will cast such gloom upon the world that the new age will become one of profound pessimism? We have gone on lengthening life on the assumption that it is intrinsically valuable. Possibly the woes of the present war will blight the flower of our idealism like a late frost and ruin the hopes of fruit. Why believe with the physiologist that we may lengthen life and regard its close with reasoned equanimity when science shall have dissolved its mystery, if the quality of that life is poorer? Mere lengthening of years is not of the essence of progress. Recently a writer in the *Révue des deux Mondes* stated that in France men are now looking upon death reasonably because the sorrow of life has been so immeasurably increased by this war that death affords a welcome escape from its anxieties, sufferings, and tears. Lucretius expresses the mood especially well. In the last generation, this writer avers, when life was comfortable the average person feared death. He put it from him as an ugly dream. From the

*Presidential Address before the British Association, 1912.

ice-bound barrier of death a chilling wind blew and men sought to escape it by living on the sunny side of the hill, believing that when evening fell they would go out into a raw night without stars. But the war has changed all that. Death now offers an escape from a vale of woe.

Evolution and Progress Different Conceptions

I have dwelt upon these contrasted views because I desire to emphasize the fact that evolution and progress are not the same. The latter concerns the intrinsic value of the life we possess. Progress is not to be narrowly defined in terms of material well-being or of the growth of scientific knowledge and its applications to the external equipment of the human race. It is determined by the essential quality and worth of the ideals that man sets before himself, by the measure in which he realizes them and by the harmony that this accomplishment induces both in himself and in the society of which he is a member. Huxley defined the law of external nature, which he read in terms of the doctrine of evolution, as "the cosmic process"; translated into the moral domain it was "the self-assertion, the unscrupulous seizing upon all that can be grasped, the tenacious holding of all that can be kept, which constitute the struggle for existence."* But he also recognized in human life the "ethical process which checks the cosmic process at every step." By the potency of this "ethical process" Huxley would estimate the real progress of humanity. "Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest in respect of the whole of the conditions which obtain, but of those who are ethically the best."**

Provisional Definition of Progress

Adopting these terms that Huxley has coined we may make a working definition for ourselves—Progress is to be measured by the relative proportion of "the ethical process" to "the cosmic process" at any definite stage of the world's

Evolution and Ethics, 1903 p. 51.
**Op. cit.*, p. 81.

history. It is to be estimated by the rationality of life rather than by the length of days.

But is it not the Ironic Spirit that prompts us if we speak at such a time as this of Progress in other terms than those of "reeking tube and iron shard?" Have our fine dreams that we spun before 1914 all been shot away? When we come to grips not with nightmares which vanish but with horrible realities that clutch us in open daylight, are we likely to sink into pessimism and think that the late-comer "Progress" is a delusion? That were, I believe, too doleful a view. We have been chastened, however, and have grown less confident as to the triumphant advance of the human race over all obstacles to the goal of its perfection. The future of mankind is shrouded in mystery. Foul weather has succeeded fair days with disconcerting suddenness, and we have no grounds for assuming that this is the last storm that will snap off fruit and branches from our civilization. Even in this Western world we are not in the mood to-day to indulge as optimistically as before the anticipations of the French theorists as to the indefinite perfectibility of the human species on this earth.

Checks to Optimism

Nor does Christianity itself compel us to adopt such a theory. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus sets forth the different kinds of soil on which the seed of His Gospel will fall. There is the hard beaten track through the corn-field from which the birds pick off the grains, the thin soil on an underlying rocky bed, ground that is not clean, and good ground that yields in abundance. By the use of this parable Jesus warns His disciples against undue enthusiasm. He interprets thereby the quality of their environment, and there is no reason to doubt that He would take a similar view of the modern world, for that relation of soils and seed illustrates the response to moral issues ordinarily given by the average society of to-day. Only a portion of the world lives and probably always will live by the ideal. It is true that the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Seed growing through all its stages—blade, ear, full corn in the ear—indicate His expectation that His Kingdom would grow to

such proportions as to draw the children of men from everywhere to its protecting shade, but He fixed His view also upon another world as the final realm of His Kingdom.

Though our safest method is to take short views, there are still good reasons for tracing an upward path even in and through the present agony. Progress in the past has not had free course. There have been many set-backs, and if at present we are perplexed we need not swing from buoyancy into hopelessness. It is an ancient experience of our race that the finest virtues are often tempered in the furnace of suffering. It behooves us, however, to consider both the evils and the possible good that face us in the present distress.

Evil Results of the Present Distress

One of the most obvious of these evils is the rift in Western civilization, the snapping of sympathy which like a wire should carry intelligent messages from nation to nation; and alas! it will long be dissevered. An irreparable loss this, because civilization is enriched by the unique ideas that come and go between each nation and race, and if these do not interchange in free intercourse the isolation of the people affects injuriously what should be a common possession of mankind. Nor is it a certainty that the unselfish emotions which have been called forth in the belligerent nations will be maintained, for the loss of hundreds of thousands of the idealistic youth of the world is in itself a serious drain on its moral resources.

There is also a profound feeling of insecurity abroad. We have discovered with a great shock that the world is not nearly so honest as we had supposed it to be; nations have suddenly come to trust one another less than they did; and your President has found it necessary to ask you to protect yourselves against the possibility of aggressiveness. In the society of mankind weapons must be carried for defence as men carried them in pioneer days on this continent or in mediaeval Europe. For a time at least the year 1916 has plunged us into a less hopeful condition than existed in the first decade of the twentieth century.

It may be also that when the war is over such an impetus will have been given to technical efficiency that the world will be turned into a huge workshop. Should the immediate future be absorbed in the replenishing of diminished stocks, the capture of new markets, and the acquisition of commerce, we may readily fall into the disastrous but easy habit of measuring Progress once again in terms of mere industrial success.

Reasons for Hopefulness

To redress the balance these considerations are to be set in the opposite scale. Awful though the agony of Europe is, there are certain advantages that will result from its being so long protracted. Great moral and social changes, if they come without revolution and are to be permanent, require time for their comprehension, and the months or years of enforced cooperation between various grades of society in the prosecution of a common patriotism will create a new mutual understanding in each belligerent nation, especially those that are victors. Burning questions will have cooled off. A universal sacrifice will have produced a common sympathy, and this sacrifice may win what legislation never would have secured. In the future there will be fewer joltings of the social machine because it will have been placed on new bearings. The world will have won a new admiration for the heroic, for public service, for sacrifice; a new spirit of generosity will have been evoked, and enforced economy, at least in some countries, may usher in days of simplicity in which for a time homely virtues will thrive.

A School of Discipline

Assuredly the youth of the countries that I know best are receiving their education in an unprecedented school of discipline. The curious searcher into theories is bustled aside by the eager man who is intent upon discovering his immediate duty in a world of hard realities. Old prejudices are giving way in the strain that has been put upon them and the younger generation are throwing from them many broken dogmas. They are making for themselves their own theories and discovering their own principles at a time when they cannot be satisfied with conventional doctrines. On the

youth of the present the end of one age has come crashing down, and, as it happened after the French Revolution so it may happen soon again, they will not debate curiously how true the old dogmas have been but whether they are strong enough to build a new society with. This generation at least will be sincere. They are realizing an ethical purpose by incessant effort, and in this lies the most certain hope of Progress, for it is not transmitted by mere sequence of events from fathers to languid sons with a rich inheritance, but it is a possession of those who for themselves lay the foundations anew by hard work on a solid rock.

Democracy has not yet fully justified itself. Many who have rested their hopes upon it have become disillusioned. They see less freedom of thought than they had hoped for: majorities disregard minorities; corporations have no souls; labor unions cow the individual; beauty is too often scorned; the gentler virtues wither amidst materialistic selfishness. But there is reason to hope that in the furnace of this world-disaster many inveterate evils will perish and that virtues will be tempered as fine instruments for pruning rank or spurious growths.

Though I have never been able to persuade myself that Progress is so assured that we may with certainty look forward to the age when evil will have righted itself and the world will be converted into a Paradise by the mere march of events, or that the ultimate goal of our species is a perfected race on this earth as the French philosophers dreamed, yet even through our great agony we get glimpses of sunshine which promise a brighter day for those who will succeed us.

> "We men, who in our morn of youth defied
> The elements, must vanish—be it so!
> Enough, if something from our hands have power
> To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
> And if, as towards the silent tomb we go,
> Through love, through hope and faith's transcendent dower,
> We feel that we are greater than we know."

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